

Put city's ATD allotment into buses

Rey Saldaña, For the Express-News

Published 3:46 pm, Friday, July 31, 2015



For an entire month, I was challenged to experience life in San Antonio without a car, and the result was a frustrating and grueling perspective on San Antonio's public transit experience.

However, there is something we can do to fix it — we can begin to fund it appropriately.

When asked about my experience, I tell people about the most important finding. I found some of the hardest-working people in San Antonio lining up at bus stops at 6 a.m. all across our city. They begin the two-hour journey to work, and they do so without complaints.

The IHOP worker who catches the 5 a.m. bus on the South Side to arrive on the North Side before 7 a.m., the elderly woman in a hotel uniform whose hands are weathered and calloused from the hundreds of beds she made that day, and the mother and children on their way to H-E-B for groceries and pharmacy medications all deserve better. They simply cope with what they're given, and it's time for us all to demand better.

It is not by accident that our city's public transportation system fails to provide convenience and frequency; it is by design. In 1977, voters approved a sales tax that would create VIA Metropolitan Transit, to be funded by one-half of 1 cent of our city's sales tax. Unknowingly, voters and policymakers were setting us up for failure.

VIA Metropolitan Transit is doing the best it can with limited resources, but one-half of your sales-tax penny falls well short of any other major Texas city operating on a full cent: Austin, Dallas, Houston and El Paso.

If transportation were a right — and by all accounts it is a necessity for a productive citizen — we would be hampering opportunity and access to jobs, schools, health care and other resources.

What is it going to take to improve? Any plan or expansion is going to require a re-evaluation and discussion around VIA's funding model. In fact, the city needs to be the first to step up by offering our portion of the 2004 voter-approved Advanced Transportation District revenues — worth approximately \$15 million a year — to create convenience and frequency.

To that end, VIA is gathering feedback across the county for its comprehensive Vision 2040 plan. With the city's help, the vision can be realized in 2030 instead.

I envision a future with 24-hour bus service, increased express routes, 15-minute bus stop frequency, dedicated bus lanes, reliability, comfort and safety.

Instead, we have far too many examples of inefficiency. For instance, one morning I attended an event at Bibliotech, Bexar County's digital library, which is a 10-minute car ride from my home. The journey took me one hour and 20 minutes, and included three bus transfers.

I am not suggesting that we take vehicles off the road or force everyone onto buses, bikes or car share. I am, however, suggesting that we create a system that appeals to those who choose to leave their car at home and those who can't afford the luxury of choosing. We must do this not only because it will relieve your commute to work, decrease our DWI problem and bring more choice riders to VIA, but because it's basic city planning.

As Americans, we love our cars, which explains why we built around them exclusively to the detriment of alternative methods of transportation. With such a narrow-minded transportation focus, I will offer a simple prediction for a city with a rapidly growing population, increasingly congested highways and a millennial generation increasingly interested in multimodal transportation: Cities across the country will drive right past us in the race for jobs, air quality, economic development and improved quality of life.

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